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ABSTRACT

As the community college student population increases in age, the number of older-than-average (OTA) students with physical and learning handicaps increases. Physical handicaps to learning can include back problems, carpal tunnel syndrome, and hearing or eye-sight problems. Students may not be aware of solutions, however, and instructors may not recognize the problems. At Portland Community College (PCC) (Oregon), a formal program exists to aid learning disabled and physically limited students. In addition, in-service classes for faculty have helped them recognize such signs of handicaps as problems with spelling, writing, and basic math; life or work accomplishments that far exceed academic successes; difficulty understanding verbal instruction; the need for oral repetition of written instruction; and difficulty staying awake in class or sitting still for class period. In an orientation to college course at PCC, students are assessed for any barriers to learning via student concerns surveys and several strategies are employed to help OTA students. These include: (1) the use of texts in large print on soft glare paper; (2) shorter lectures; (3) the dramatization of course content; (4) the encouragement of group learning and problem-solving; (5) providing for individual selection of assignments; (6) allowing students to tape class sessions; and (7) incorporation of stress reduction and time management in the classroom. (Contains 30 references.) (The student survey and personal concerns list used in the orientation course are appended.) (KP)

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IDENTIFYING THE HIDDEN HANDICAPS OF THE OTA (OLDER THAN AVERAGE) STUDENT

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IDENTIFYING THE HIDDEN HANDICAPS OF THE OTA (OLDER-THAN-AVERAGE) STUDENT

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As the student population increases in age, the number of older students with hidden handicaps to learning increases. This paper speaks to the non-visible physical and learning disabilities that interfere with student success and how the classroom instructor can identify and assist OTA (older-than-average) students in surmounting these barriers to college success.

When acquired disabilities have been instrumental in directing a career change, the affected individual may not be aware of how the standard academic setting and demands will prove difficult.

* People with bad backs find sitting through long classes painful, yet they may have scheduled themselves with few breaks between classes.

* Those with carpal tunnel syndrome can no longer do their work, duties, but have not anticipated that taking notes for lecture classes will prove very difficult.

* Students on certain kinds of high blood pressure-medication have great difficulty in speed-reading courses and begin to feel it is their-academic potential at fault, rather than recog-nizing it is the side effect of their medicine.

* Those with hearing or eye-sight problems, may not recognize the need to position themselves stra-tegically in the classroom so they are able to hear or see needed information.

Once the OTA students become aware of the difficulties in an academic setting, they may not know there are solutions for their problems. If the instructor does not know about the problem, the student may be lost to college.

Adult students not only come in all sizes, shapes and ages, they come with varied learning styles concerns abilities, and disabilities. Assessment is the initial step taken in starting the OTA student on the steps to college success. For years, this assessment has taken place in my class by a first week completion of Personal Concerns and Student Survey questionnaires. (See attached) Evidence is increasing that the OTA student has a much greater percentage of physical handicaps or learning disabilities than those shown in the younger college population.

In the average population, 8% will prove to be disabled in a medical, physical or sensory way. In my class of 40 students which started this Winter Term, almost 40% identified themselves as having a disability. In my students for the academic year of 1988-89, 13% identified themselves as having a disability.

My background includes little formal education in working with learning disabled or physically limited students. Personal history has made me sensitive to the physically disabled as I've had chronic back problems all of my adult life. As a parent of a child who refused to read until the sixth grade and who today (as an adult) is still the world's worst speller, I am aware of learning disabilities. As a teacher in the inner-city, I became aware of the many bright children who did not learn easily in the formal classroom, but who did wonderfully with their work in the shop or art classes. These experiences sensitized me to the barriers to learning and the tremendous adaptability of human intelligence. If individuals cannot learn one way, they will seek another way to succeed. In the fifteen years I have been working with adults in a Community College setting, these physically limited and learning disabled students are constantly teaching me ways to be a better instructor. They have made me an eager searcher for resources that will help them remove their barriers. What resources are at hand ? What is available for the student with special needs?

We, at Portland Community College, have a formal program in the Office of Disabilities for the learning disabled and physically limited student. We also have a licensed physical therapist on our physical education staff who has instituted a Corrective Physical Education program. In-service classes have increased awareness of the faculty to students with special needs. There are

still many students unaware of help available or who do not know they fall into a category that deserves and can access special help. Unfortunately, there are still instructors who are not aware of help for students with special needs.

A learning-disabled person is one who is of normal, or above normal, intelligence who has trouble taking in, processing or putting out information. The disability can take many forms. such as dyslexia (reading impairment), dyspasia (difficulty articulating ideas and comprehending spoken words:), dysgraphia (writing impairment), and sequential memory disorder. This last may be manifested in poor spelling ability or in reversal of numbers in math. Learning disabled adults may not have had appropriate evaluation in their previous schooling. They frequently think of themselves as not too bright in certain areas because it takes them too much longer to learn some things; i.e. spelling or math. They have become adept at avoiding areas that are difficult for them, such as writing, counting change, or balancing their checkbooks. Students who are fully aware of their problems, and know coping mechanisms to overcome their disability are the exception rather than the rule. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has mandated that these students have special help available, but they are frequently unaware of the Act and of the assistance they could access. Learning disabled adults concentrate on succeeding in other ways, like Cher and Tom Cruise in entertainment, or DaVinci in the art world. Cher and Tom Cruise now know they have, dyslexia. DaVinci was a mirror writer and Einstein got mixed up with simple math. They succeeded in spite of their disabilities. It did not occur to them or to others that a learning disability existed, or that it was limiting to their potential.

As an instructor looks out on the average class, sprinkled with the growing number of OTA students, she, or he, may not be aware that there is a man in the back, row with a hearing aid in both ears. Or that in the front row, another is losing his sight because of diabetes. Still another, on the side of the room, is on kidney dialysis twice a week. A woman asks repeatedly that oral instructions be written on the board. I have had all these students in my classes

Some learning-disabled adults have become that way through a head injury or stroke. Getting them comfortable with their new limits can be extremely difficult. This population is more likely to be referred by vocational rehabilitation and special assistance can be immediately accessed.

However, the adult who has had inadequate or non-existent assessment is the one you are most likely to see in the classroom. They have not had an occupational therapist's help. The Learning Disability Specialist is a stranger.

The learning disabled have self-referred themselves away from school and gone into the work world. Because of low pay for untrained workers, physical changes, plant closures, or demand for more technical know-how, they are streaming back to the college campus in ever increasing numbers. This term, in my College Survival and Success course, initial surveying of my forty students brought forth the result that 40% of my students classified themselves as having a disability. Some, of course, have readily observable physical disabilities. There is one deaf student with her interpreter, and two students in wheelchairs. For these, it is obvious that some special assistance is needed. What about the others, the "walking wounded", who look normal but who are in severe back pain, can't take notes, or don't hear oral instructions. Then there are those students who are just "plain dumb". Folks who don't know they have a learning disability, but do know they have never been successful in school. How are they identified and assisted?

Initial presentation of course material for my college orientation class includes visual and oral information about learning and physical disabilities and the help available for them. The syllabus for the course includes a notice, "Any student who feels that he or she may need an accommodation for any sort of disability should make an appointment to see me during my office hours" One of my first assignments is a one-page writing assignment. As an instructor with K-12 teacher certification it is easy to pick up major writing problems. Comprehension is verified by a question-answer assignment from the text.

If they have taken our placement tests, these scores are checked in the first several works. A half hour interview with me or one of the other counselors is required for my course and past school and work experience is explored in this session. The results of the personal survey sheet and Personal Concerns List are filled out the first day of class and checked. If appropriate, referral is made to the Office of Disabilities for evaluation or Corrective Physical Education for strengthening and modification techniques. For others, who do fine academically, being aware of seizure problems or other illnesses requiring medication, allows me to have immediate response. If needed, a quick call may be made to our Emergency Medical Technicians on staff.

For those in recovery, notification of the daily AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) or, NA (Narcotics Anonymous) meetings on campus is survival information. Those simply needing brush-up help on writing or math skills are referred to the Alternative Learning Center, Math Drop--In Center, audio-visual tapes or individual tutors. Thus, right from the start of their college career, they know that people, places and resources are available to them. A tour of the campus makes sure that they know the locations of such help.

What are some of the signs without formal testing that may indicate to an instructor a possible learning disability?

Poor Spelling
Don't like to read
Have trouble writing
Life/work accomplishments far exceed
academic successes
Trouble with basic math
Prior history of Learning Disability Assessment
Dislike of previous school experience
Don't understand verbal instruction
Need oral repetition of written instruction
Procrastinates in school work, but not life work
Verbal ability far exceeds reading/writing ability
Have trouble sitting still for class period

These areas are probed in the one-on-one counseling sessions

Other indications have to do with physical limitations.

What are the signs that indicate hidden physical problems?

* Trouble sitting for class period
* Not taking, or difficulty taking, notes in class
* Changing careers due to change of physical status
* Having trouble staying awake in class
* Asking for oral repetition of written work
* Frequently arriving late to class, leaving in middle of class or leaving early from class

How has my orientation to college course been designed so that all students can get the information, resources, or helpful personnel they need? The course includes:

* Text in easy reading---large print
* Text has soft glare paper
* Text is available on "books for the blind"
* Few long lectures
* Use of visual aids
* Dramatization of content
* Tests designed so checks or circles mark answer
* "Study-buddy" system Utilized
* Language kept simple (no academic jargon.)
* Encourage group learning/problem solving
* Give room for individual selection of assignments
* Allow taping of class sessions
* Insist on notebook organization
* Urge students to ask for what they need
* Emphasize time management techniques
* Encourage use of student success tapes
* Incorporate stress reduction techniques
* Much small group interaction/study sessions

In this paper, the social, emotional, financial psychological and dependency problems have not been addressed. This does not indicate that these issues are not evidenced in the OTA student. They, also, are in much greater evidence than in the younger college population. Besides the Personal Concerns and Student Survey data, the counselor interview is most useful at discovering these hidden handicaps to college success.

It is hoped that this information can make instructors and other college personnel more aware of the high incidence of hidden learning disabilities and physical limitations that are prevalent in the OTA student. Since this is the population we will see in growing numbers in our college classrooms, increased awareness is mandatory for college success for these students.

Walt Whitman, American poet of the 19th century, recognized that people need different types of learning opportunities. His words may be used as a guiding light for the twenty first century.

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were
ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and
diagrams to add, divide, and
measure them
When I sitting heard the astronomer
where he lectured with much
applause in the lecture room,
How soon unaccountable I became
tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd
off by myself,
In the mystical moist night air, and
from time to time
Looked up in perfect silence at the stars

To parody a statement in the book, Personality in Nature, Society and Culture and to summarize:

Vive La Difference

In certain respects, every student is-

Like every other student
Like some other student
Like no other student

Walt Whitman, Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose (New York: Library of America, Viking Press Distributor, 19820, pp 409-410.

The creative instructor persists in searching for ways to vary and adapt instruction to fit the unique needs of individual students. As higher education unveils the hidden handicaps of these OTA students it raises the curtain on a great natural resource the potential of people.

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Attachment #1

STUDENT SURVEY — Student Services

Name_____ Soc. Sec. #_____

Age____ M ( ) F ( )

High School Graduate Yes___ No___ College Completed 1 2 3 4 5 6
Years since last formal education_____ (circle year)

Is this the first time you have tried college? Yes___ No___

The reason you are in college (check all that apply):

1. Change of careers ( )
2. Increase job security ( )
3. Increase job skills ( )
4. Find best career for me ( )
5. Make life more interesting ( )
6. Find new friends ( )
7. For fun of learning
8. Get better paid job
9. Family wants me to go
10. Get vocational degree
11. Earn university transfer credits
12. Other_____
13. Change in physical ability ( )
14. My employer advised me

Are you:
__employed full time __employed part-time __underemployed __not employed

Marital status: ( ) single ( ) married ( ) divorced ( ) widowed ( ) separated

Children under 18: _____number _____ages

Occupation_____

Do you have a disability?	Yes___ No___
Have you had difficulty with school?	Yes___ No___
Did one or both parents go to college?	Yes___ No___
Are you the first person in your family to try college?	Yes___ No___

Mother's occupation_____
Father's occupation_____
Partner's occupation_____

Check all that apply to you in last year:

Recently relocated	( )	Let go from job	( )
Change of marital status	( )	Job security shaky	( )
Last child in school	( )	Bored on job	( )
Last child left home	( )	Job ended	( )

Class times you prefer: ___ mornings ___ evening ___ afternoons ___ weekend

How did you find out about PCC classes? Check all that apply.

____ Schedule mailed to home	____ Radio/TV
____ Employer	____ Friend
____ Postcard mailed to you	____ Family member
____ Newspaper	____ Other

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PERSONAL CONCERNS LIST

M F Age: SS#

Rate each issue by circling the number which is of personal concern to you. 1 = small concern 5 = big concern.

	Small				Big
1. Shyness.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Feeling overwhelmed by the school setting.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Stress.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Not knowing how to organize my time effectively.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Physical problems will stop success.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Depression.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Friend's/partner's reaction to my attending school.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Feeling overwhelmed by school work.	1	2	3	4	5
9. Pressure of job, school and family.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Having enough money to live on while in school.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Child care.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Drugs/alcohol.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Fear of college teachers.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Fitting in socially at school and making friends.	1	2	3	4	5
15. Not knowing my way around campus.	1	2	3	4	5

Other:

Rate each statement by circling the number you feel describes you:

	Small				Big
1. I'm not sure that I can do all the work required.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I'm not sure what classes I should take.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I don't know what career to choose.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Sitting for a long time is hard for me.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I have trouble setting goals and sticking to them.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I'm not sure I'm ready for college.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I'm afraid I've been out of school for too long.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I have trouble asking questions in class.	1	2	3	4	5
9. I'm afraid of math classes.	1	2	3	4	5
10. I have a lot of responsibilities outside of school.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Most of my friends are not in school at this time.	1	2	3	4	5
12. I don't read well *or* I don't like to read.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I'm concerned about taking tests.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I am having some personal problems at this time.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I've tried to go to college before, but I had to quit.	1	2	3	4	5

Other:

On the other side of the page list *three* things you hope to learn to accomplish in this class: